[Information on gwan kwoth or prophets are filed according to their functions under category 791 or 792.]

1: Evans-Pritchard FJ22 Nuer FJ22
792●

[For information on "leopard-skin chiefs" see category 624.]

1: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1940
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

721 in the enemy's kraal, the oxen being mainly slaughtered for food. If the Dinka gathered reinforcements and returned to fight they were met in full battle formation. Nuer fight in three divisions with two or three hundred yards between each, and if one division is engaged the others advance or retreat parallel to it according to the fortunes of war. A party of scouts are in advance of the central division and they charge up to the enemy, hurl their spears at them, and fall back on the main body.

The raiders spent several weeks in Dinkaland and sometimes remained there throughout the dry season, living on the milk and flesh of captured cattle, on pillaged grain, and on fish. Using a captured kraal as a base they extended their raid against distant camps. Nuer migrations seem to have been conducted on these lines, the raiders settling permanently in Dinka country and by systematic raiding compelling the inhabitants to withdraw farther and farther from the points of occupation. In the following season a new series of raids was initiated and the process was repeated till the Dinka were compelled to seek refuge with their kinsfolk of another tribe and leave their country to its invaders. If settlement was not contemplated, however, the raiders returned home when they considered that they had sufficient booty.

721 167

727 Before camp was broken up there took place a custom highly indicative of Nuer sense of equality and justice. It was recognised that the whole force was jointly responsible for the success of the raid and there was therefore a redistribution of the booty. The prophet whose revelations sanctioned the raid first made a round of the camp and selected from each household a cow for the divine spirit of whom he was the mouthpiece. By this time a household possessed some fifty head, so that it was no hardship to be asked to give one to the spirit. There then took place a general scramble and everybody rushed amid the herd to earmark beasts for himself. A man who could first seize an animal, tether it, and cut its ear had absolute claim to it. The man who originally captured a cow had the advantage that it was tethered near his windscreen, but if he and members of his household had an undue share of the booty they could not earmark all the beasts before they were seized by others. As might be supposed, men frequently sustained injury in these scrambles, for if two men seized the same cow they fought with clubs for possession of it. One must not use the spear on these occasions. Men of neighbouring camps took part in one another's redistributions and there must have been great confusion. Captives, women of marriageable age, boys, and girls, were not redistributed but belonged to their original captor. Older women and babies were clubbed and, when the raid was on a village, their

1: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1940
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

791
554

districts, and occasionally even in large tribal sections. These fetish owners are not, however, in any sense tribal leaders and cannot compare in social importance with the prophets.

792

Owing to the fact that Nuer prophets had been the foci of opposition to the Government they were in disgrace and the more influential of them under restraint or in hiding during my visits to Nuerland, so that I was not able to make detailed observations on their behaviour.[1] Without discussing Nuer religious categories it may be said that a prophet is a man who is possessed by one of the sky-spirits, or Gods, whom Nuer regard as sons of the Sky-god. Nuer have great respect for these spirits and fear, and readily follow, those whom they possess. Prophets, consequently, achieved greater sanctity and wider influence than any other persons in Nuer society. A prophet is known as *gak* and is sometimes referred to as *cak kwoth*, an ant of God. He also comes into the general category of *gaan kwoth*, possessor of a spirit.

The first prophet to have gained great influence appears to have been Ngundeng who died in 1906. He was a Lou tribesman of the GAATLEAK clan and an immigrant from the Eastern Jikany. He had practised as a leopard-skin chief before he had acquired a reputation as a prophet by prolonged fasts and other erratic behaviour, by his skill in curing barrenness and sickness, and by his prophecies. Women came to him to be made fruitful from all over Lou, from the Eastern Jikany tribes, and even from the west of the Zeraf and Nile. Many brought oxen which Ngundeng sacrificed to Deng, the Sky-god which possessed him. He then anointed them with his spittle. When small-pox threatened the Lou he went out to meet it and to stay its advance by sacrifice of oxen. He foretold cattle epidemics and other events and led expeditions against the Dinka.

When Ngundeng died, the spirit of Deng eventually entered his son Gwek, who began to prophesy and to cure barrenness and sickness, as his father had done. However, he never displayed the pathological qualities of his father, who appears to have been a genuine psychotic. The spirit of Deng had passed over his elder brothers, or did not long reside in them. Nuer say that a spirit eventually returns to the lineage of the man whom it first

[1] The Government has always looked askance at prophets and opposed their influence. See, for some pejorative references to them, Jackson, *op. cit.*, pp. 90–1; Ferguson, Appendix to Jackson, p. 109; C. A. Willis, 'The Cult of Deng', *S.N. and R.*, vol. xi, 1928, p. 200.

1: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1940
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

792 possessed, even if a generation or two later, and the chosen vessel generally becomes aware of its entry by experiencing severe sickness with delirium. Ordinary Nuer, particularly if they are young, do not want to be possessed, and it seems that it is often an abnormal person who is possessed in the first place, while it is the most ambitious of his sons on whom his mantle falls, for he would seem to welcome possession, although not undergoing fasts to procure it. Gwek was killed by Government forces in 1928. Another famous prophet, Din or Dengleaka, of the Gaawar tribe, was a captured Dinka who set about to acquire a spirit by fasting and solitude. He later achieved fame and power by successful campaigns against the Dinka, whose country his followers occupied, and against Arab slavers. Like Ngundeng he had a reputation for performing miracles. Dengleaka died in 1908 and his son Dwal became possessed with the spirit of the Sky-god, Din. He is at present a political prisoner. The only prophet I have met, Buom, of Dok country, was possessed by the spirit of a Sky-god, Teeny. He was regarded as selfish and greedy by his neighbours, having been cunning enough to get himself accepted as a Government chief. He showed too great ambition, however, and is now in exile. Well-known prophets, in other parts of Nuerland, were Mut of the Eastern Gaajak, Kulang in Western Nuerland, and others.

792 778 Brief reference must be made to the very remarkable pyramid erected by Ngundeng, and added to by Gwek, in the Rumjok section of the Lou tribe. It was fifty to sixty feet high with large elephant tusks planted round the base and at the summit. Dr. Crispin's photograph on Plate XXV, taken in 1911, shows the palisade of ivory tusks, the type of material of which it was constructed, and weathering, due to rains, round the base. It was blown up by Government forces in 1928. The material used in construction consisted of ashes, earth, and debris excavated from sites of cattle camps. People came from all over Lou and the Eastern Jikany tribes, bringing oxen with them for sacrifice, to assist in the building. Nuer say that it was built in honour of the Sky-god Deng and for the glory of his prophet Ngundeng. There is no doubt that the cult of Deng was of Dinka origin and probably the idea of a mound came from the same source. Besides the famous Lou pyramid there is said to be a smaller one at Thoc in Eastern Jikany country, built by a prophet called Deng, son of Dul.

[[77]]

792 Nuer are unanimous in stating that these prophets are a recent development. They say that Deng descended from the sky in recent times—within living memory, in fact—and that he was the first, or almost the first, of the Sky-gods to come to

1: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1940
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

792 earth. They state that in the old days there were no prophets: only the ritual officials mentioned earlier. The records of European travellers are not explicit enough to confirm or reject this statement. Poncet says that among the Nuer in his day were rich and important persons, honoured after their death, whom he calls *devins ou sorciers* and *jongleurs*,[1] and Brun-Rollet says that the Nuer had a kind of pope for whom they had veneration akin to worship, but his account is too fanciful to carry weight.[2] Whilst it is difficult to believe that there were

231 534

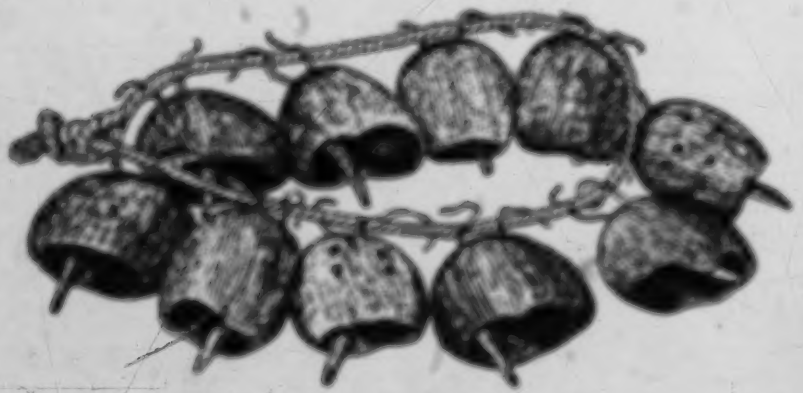

FIG. 13. Calf's bell-necklace of palm nuts.

no cases of possession sixty years ago we must, in the absence of conflicting evidence, accept so unanimous a declaration by Nuer that there was no possession by Sky-gods, and it seems fairly certain that if there were any prophets at that time their influence was restricted to small localities and had not the tribal [172] significance of more recent times. There is some evidence that the development of Nuer prophets was related to the spread of Mahdism from the Northern Sudan. However that may be, there is no doubt that powerful prophets arose about the time when Arab intrusion into Nuerland was at its height and that after the reconquest of the Sudan they were more respected and had more influence than any other persons in Nuerland.

792 619 Nevertheless, we consider that the power of these prophets, even of the most successful ones, has been exaggerated and that

[1] Poncet, *op. cit.*, p. 40. [2] Brun-Rollet, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

1: Evans-Pritchard E-S (1931, 1936) 1940
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

792 619

their tribal position has been misunderstood. The earliest Government officials to enter Lou country have recorded that Ngundeng was greatly feared and respected and were of the opinion that if the Lou were to be administered he would have either to be reconciled or removed. However, his son, Gwek, was not supported against the Government by some sections of the tribe. Mr. Struvé, then Governor of the Upper Nile Province, reported that Dwal, son of Diu, had 'rather shaky authority' among the Gaawar. I received the impression in 1932 that Buom had far more power in Duk country as a government chief than he ever had in pre-government days as a prophet. A prophet's curse is feared, but armed intervention of Government forces is a weightier sanction. Buom was attempting to exercise unprecedented judicial functions and his banishment met with no popular hostility and with little regret. There is no good evidence that the earlier prophets were more than spiritual persons, whose ritual powers were used particularly in warfare, though some of the later ones appear to have begun to settle disputes, at any rate in their own villages and districts. Of them all, perhaps Gwek came nearest to exercising political functions and to imposing his authority outside his own district, but the hostility between tribes and between tribal segments rendered effective personal control impossible.

792 (721 619

The only activities of prophets which can truly be called tribal were their initiation of raids against the Dinka and their rallying of opposition to Arab and European aggression, and it is in these actions that we see their structural significance and account for their emergence and the growth of their influence. All the important prophets about whom we have information gained their prestige by directing successful raids on the Dinka, for these raids were carried out in the names of the spirits which promised rich booty by their lips. No extensive raids were undertaken without the permission and guidance of prophets, who received instructions from the Sky-gods in dreams and trances about the time and objective of attack, and often they accompanied them in person and performed sacrifices before battle. They took for themselves part of the spoil and to some extent supervised the division of the rest of it. The warriors sang war hymns to the Sky-gods before starting on raids and the

1: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1940
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

792 721 619

sacrifices to them by their prophets were believed to ensure booty and safety.

For the first time a single person symbolized, if only to a moderate degree and in a mainly spiritual and uninstitutionalized form, the unity of a tribe, for prophets are tribal figures. But they have a further significance, for their influence extended over tribal boundaries. Gwek had great influence in Gaajok, and it is said that because of it the Lou and the Gaajok for a time paid compensation for homicide between them. His influence reached as far as the Eastern Gaagwang and Gaajak. Dengleaka had a similar influence in the valley of the Zeraf, especially among the Thiang. Some of the Western Nuer prophets had a reputation among a number of neighbouring tribes which united for raids at the direction of their spirits. They were not a mechanism of tribal structure like leopard-skin chiefs, but were pivots of federation between adjacent tribes and personified the structural principle of opposition in its widest expression, the unity and homogeneity of Nuer against foreigners. Probably, the coalition of tribes and the organization of joint raids is very largely their achievement—though one cannot be sure of this in the absence of historical records—and has made them important and powerful figures in Nuerland. This interpretation explains how it is that prophets began half a century ago, or at any rate came to the fore then. Certain structural changes were taking place in response to changed conditions: the development of functions that were more purely political than any exercised by individuals before and of a greater degree of unity among neighbouring tribes than there had been hitherto. As Sky-gods passed at the death of prophets into their sons we are further justified in suggesting growth of hereditary political leadership which, with the strong tendency towards federation between adjacent tribes we attribute to the new Arab-European menace. Opposition between Nuer and their neighbours had always been sectional. They were now confronted by a more formidable and a common enemy. When the Government crushed the prophets this tendency was checked. As we understand the situation, the prophets were inevitably opposed to the Government because it was this opposition among the people which led to their emergence and was personified in them.

792 648 178

1: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1940
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

in arranging for its boys to be initiated. After the operation the boys live in partial seclusion and are subject to various taboos. This is a time of mild licence and they pass out of it by a special rite. On the day of the cutting, and on the day of the passing out of seclusion, sacrifices are made and there is festivity, which includes licentious horseplay and the singing of lewd songs. Only age-mates of the father of the initiate in whose homestead the feasting takes place attend it: others keep at a distance lest they see the nakedness of their kinswomen and mothers-in-law.

II

All boys initiated during a number of successive years belong to a single age-set (*ric*). There has, till recently, been a four-year interval between the end of one such set and the commencement of the next. These four years are known as the time 'when the knife is hung up', and at the end of that period it is said 'the knife is brought out' and boys may then be initiated again. A certain *wut ghok*, 'Man of the Cattle', is, in each tribe, responsible for opening and closing the initiation periods and thereby dividing the sets. He performs the appropriate rite in his district, and when the news goes round other districts begin or cease initiation. He derives prestige from his functions, but they are ritual and give him no political authority. Sometimes, in Western Nuerland, they are performed by a prophet, but it is possible that in these cases the prophet is also a Man of the Cattle. The age-sets are organised independently in each tribe, at any rate in the larger tribes, but it often happens that when a new set has been started in one tribe an adjacent tribe will follow its lead, so that the names and periods of sets in neighbouring tribes are frequently the same. Also, though in different parts of Nuerland the names of the sets are different and the open and closed periods do not coincide, it is easy for a man who moves from one part to another to perceive in which set he would have been initiated had he been brought up in that part of the country.

To-day there are no closed periods and boys are initiated every year. The Man of the Cattle announces every few years that he is about to cut the sets and performs a ceremony by which all

8:Howell E, G-5 (1942-1944)1954
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

ability to speak for the people; in fact, to voice their will. It is in this sense that the word expresses the Nuer idea of leadership, leadership which is derived from powers of persuasion. There is no sense of domination. The concept runs right through the tradition of Nuer leaders in the past who emerged at a time when political unity was required in the face of external aggression or for the furtherance of common enterprise.

The Appointment of Tribal Authorities Today

The concept of *ruir* has been mentioned here, not so much because its existence provides evidence of anything in the nature of formalized legal procedures which operated in the past, but because it is relevant to the appointment of tribal representatives today.

In the early stages of the Administration there was a tendency to use as administrative agents persons who had acquired significance not from their positions in the dominant lineages of the tribes but from their possession of magical or religious attributes. This was at any rate partly due to the fact that at the time of the arrival of the Sudan Government, what leadership existed was vested in the 'prophets' who had usurped the position from men whose status was derived from a traditional and more orthodox background in society.

Minor administrative agents, the representatives of smaller tribal segments, were nearly always chosen from dominant (*diel*) lineages, a fact which finds expression in the use of the term *gat tiet* to denote a 'headman' of a village or a lineage. Clearly, even in the early stages, these minor agents were essentially persons put forward by the people themselves and drawn from sources which would normally provide leaders; they were not nominees chosen regardless of their status in society. A *gat nyal* from a *rul* lineage was usually disqualified from the start. For example, in the Island section of the Radh Gaawar, a man called Gathuak Ngigni was appointed chief of the Per section. I intervened in this appointment rather more emphatically than usual, for there was a shortage of suitable candidates, and Gathuak was a man who had served satisfactorily for many years as a tribal policeman and as personal assistant to the previous chief. There was noticeable opposition from some sections of the community but the majority voted for his appointment. Later he became unpopular and opposition became open. There were clearly other reasons why they wished to get rid of him, but the main reason actually given was that he was a *gat nyal* of recent Western Nuer origin. To be a *gat nyal* does not entirely disqualify a man from gaining authority over his fellows or, nowadays, from holding an official position, but it is certainly a disadvantage, and only a strong and popular character can overcome the handicap.

10:Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931-1936) 1940
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

183 they are prepared to use force, he has a good chance of obtaining
671 what is due to him, if the parties live near to one another. The usual way of obtaining one's due is to go to the debtor's kraal and take his cattle. To resist is to run the risk of homicide and feud. It seems that whether, and how, a dispute is settled depends very largely on the relative positions of the persons concerned in the kinship and age-set systems and the distance between their communities in tribal structure. In theory, one can obtain redress from any member of one's tribe, but, in fact, there is little chance of doing so unless he is a member of one's local community and a kinsman. The force of 'law' varies with the position of the parties in political structure, and thus Nuer 'law' is essentially relative, like the structure itself.

671 During the year I spent with the Nuer, I never heard a case being conducted, either before an individual or before a council of elders, and I received the impression that it is very rare for a man to obtain redress except by force or threats of force. And if the Nuer has no law, likewise he lacks government. The leopard-skin chief is not a political authority and the 'Man of the Cattle' and other ritual agents (totemic specialists, rain-makers, fetish-owners, magicians, diviners, &c.) have no political status or functions, though they may become prominent and feared in their locality. The most influential men in a village are generally the heads of joint families, especially when they are rich in cattle, of strong character, and members of the aristocratic clan. But they have no clearly defined status or function. Every Nuer, the product of a hard and equalitarian upbringing, deeply democratic, and easily roused to violence, considers himself as good as his neighbour; and families and joint families, whilst co-ordinating their activities with those of their fellow villagers,
• 792 regulate their affairs as they please. Even in raids, there is very little organization, and leadership is restricted to the sphere of fighting and is neither institutionalized nor permanent. It is politically significant only when raids are controlled and organized by prophets. No Nuer specialists can be said to be political agents and to represent, or symbolize, the unity and exclusiveness of local groups, and, apart from the prophets, none can be said to have more than local prominence. All leaders, in this vague sense of influential persons in a locality, are adults and, except for an occasional prophetess, all are men.

10:Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931-1936) 1940
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

Owing to the fact that Nuer prophets had been the foci of opposition to the Government, they were in disgrace, and the more influential of them under restraint or in hiding, during my visit to Nuerland, so that I was not able to make detailed observations on their behaviour. Nuer are unanimous in stating that they did not arise much before the end of the last century and there is some evidence to suggest that their emergence was connected with the spread of Mahdism. However that may be, there can be no doubt that powerful prophets arose about the time of Arab intrusion into Nuerland and that at the time of British conquest they were more respected and had wider influence than any other persons. No extensive raids were undertaken without their sanction and often they led them, received part of the spoil, and to some extent supervised the division of the rest of it. Though there seems to be good evidence that the earlier prophets were no more than ritual agents, some of the later ones appear to have begun to settle disputes, at any rate in their own districts. However, their chief political importance rather lay elsewhere. For the first time a single person symbolized, even if in a mainly spiritual form, the unity of a tribe, for the prophets were essentially tribal figures, though—and this fact is also of great political significance—their influence often extended over tribal boundaries and brought about a larger degree of unity among adjacent tribes than there appears to have been hitherto. When we add that there was a tendency for the spirits which possessed prophets to pass, at their deaths, into their sons, we are justified in concluding that development was taking place towards a higher degree of federation between tribes and towards the emergence of political leadership, and in explaining these changes by reference to Arab and European intrusion. Opposition between Nuer and their neighbours had always been sectional. They were now confronted by a more formidable and a common enemy. When the Government overthrew the prophets, this development was checked.

VI. Summary

We have briefly described and analysed what we regard as Nuer political structure: the relations between territorial segments within a territorial system and the relations between that and other social systems within an entire social structure. We have examined intertribal relations, and the relations between tribal

SPIRITS OF THE ABOVE

× 776 ●792 Nuer call such a charismatic person *gwan kwoth*, owner or possessor of Spirit, the name of the particular spirit sometimes being added, as *gwan kwoth deang*, the possessor of the spirit *deng*, or *gwan kwoth mani*, the possessor of the spirit *mani*. He is also referred to as the *guk* of the spirit, a word meaning a leather bag. The prophet is a bag containing the spirit. 'Possessor' might seem to be here an inappropriate translation of *gwan* ('father', 'owner', or 'master') since the spirit possesses the man rather than the man the spirit, but the man does own the spirit in the sense that it is in him and gives him spiritual power ordinary people lack.

× 776 792 828 It appears to be first known that a man has become possessed permanently by a spirit, either without or after sickness, by sustained abnormal behaviour and occasional bouts of frenzy. In these states, which are said to occur most frequently in the earlier phases of possession, when the spirit comes, or leaps, upon, or moves the prophet (to use Old Testament expressions) he acts like a madman (*yong*), and Nuer cannot always distinguish for certain at this stage between a prophet and a madman or epileptic (*gwan noka*); but if there is any doubt it is dispelled by the later behaviour of a prophet, for he ceases to prophesy only when possessed in the narrow sense of being for the time out of his mind and gives spiritual guidance when in a normal state to those who ask for it. From time to time he may have renewed mantic seizures, but these are regarded by Nuer as only outward signs of a spiritual power which directs his utterances whenever he speaks as a prophet and also when, as sometimes happens, he speaks as a judge and political leader. Nuer conceive of permanent possession of this kind, in contrast to temporary seizure in the form of Spirit-induced sickness and mediumistic trances, as a filling with Spirit as with air. They use the word *gwang* to denote Spirit penetrating or entering into and filling the man. A prophet is a person filled with, or inspired by, Spirit, which controls him as the *Ruah Adonai* controlled the prophets of the Old Testament. The word [196] *gwang*, which has much the same general sense in Dinka,[1] is used for such actions as scraping out a gourd, hollowing out a canoe or mortar, or the burrowing of a hole by a wild beast. Something is hollowed out to allow entry for something else. Dr. Mary Smith tells me that Nuer have told her that when a spirit *gwange ran*,

[1] R. Trudinger, *English–Dinka Dictionary*, 1942, p. 216.

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

fills a man, his character is changed. The man is hollowed out by spirit to receive it. In this sense *guong* is complementary to *kwoth*, inspiration to extirpation.[1/1]

Prophets may perform sacrifices on behalf of individuals or of the people of their neighbourhoods in times of sickness, for barrenness, and on other occasions when spiritual aid is required, but the main social function of the leading prophets in the past was to direct cattle-raids on the Dinka and fighting against the various foreigners who troubled the Nuer from the northern Sudan. For the most part the air-spirits are conspicuously associated with war, and Nuer prophets are chiefly regarded as the medium through which God gives orders to fight and victory. The spirits accompany the warriors to battle.

Before Nuer set off for any large-scale fighting against strangers their prophets made sacrifice and sang hymns to the spirits of the air while the warriors, kneeling on one knee and with the points of their spears resting on the ground, sang the responses. The same posture is adopted by warriors in making the responses to these songs when they are sung by a song-leader on ceremonial occasions. Also people, generally and perhaps always under a prophet's direction, sing hymns to the spirits on occasions of sickness and of other troubles; though Nuer say that they sometimes sing the hymns, as at dances, 'just to be happy with the son of God'. Unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to record more than a few verses of these hymns.

I give below a short hymn to *buk*. It is known all over Nuerland and is therefore probably earlier than most hymns. It is sometimes sung at mortuary ceremonies, and it is also sung before fishing battues are begun, on account of the spirit's association with rivers and streams.

Mother of *deng*, the ants (the Nuer) ransom their lives from thee,
Mother of *dengkur*, the ants ransom their lives from thee,
The mother of *dengkur* brings life,
The mother of *dengkur* brings me life,
Life is revived.
She brings life and our children play,
They cry aloud with joy,
With the life of the mother of *deng*, with the life of the mother of *deng*.

[1/1] [Should be expiration, see errata, cat. 116.]

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

SPIRITS OF THE ABOVE

Do not slay them jestingly[1]
Mani goes with a rush,
He goes on for ever,
The sons of Jagei are proud in the byres,[2]
Proud that they always raid the Dinka.

I do not know the time or circumstances of composition of this hymn, but as it not only exults in defeats of the Dinka and asks for victory over the people of the Nuba hills but also demands the destruction of the British it must be fairly recent and probably dates from the early days of British occupation of the Southern Sudan. Dr. Lienhardt has recorded a hymn about *deng* which vividly suggests the mobility of the spirits of the air and the ubiquity of Spirit. A man says he is tired of the demands made by *deng* and that he will move. But *deng* replies

A man avoiding *deng*
Will find *deng* in front,
On the right he will find *deng*,
On the left he will find *deng*,
Behind him he will find *deng*.

In another hymn he recorded there is a metaphor in which protection of the people by *deng* is compared to the coiling of a python around its young. These hymns are, I believe, always the creations of prophets, and Nuer say that they come to them in dreams, unlike ordinary songs or poems which men construct for themselves when idling, as when herding in the grazing grounds. We need not concern ourselves greatly with their word to word meaning. Nuer do not do so, or even know it, and the songs may be sung on occasions which in no way concern the particular spirits they are addressed to and for which the words have no relevance, the songs merely serving to create atmosphere and to express a general sense and intention. I have been told that the hymns sometimes come to a prophet through a drum, called *bul kwoth*, spirit's drum, dedicated to his spirit, which is thought to be in some way immanent in it. These drums, which are beaten at dances held in honour of the spirits to which they are dedicated, are formally dedicated by being rubbed with ashes, in the same

[1] Do not trifle with them but strike them hard.

[2] The Jagei are a small group of Nuer tribes; but since the Nuer believe that they were created in their territory the word probably here refers to the Nuer as a whole.

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

776 533 792 584 [778] way as an animal is dedicated, while a short invocation is made. They are decorated with beads and metal rings. I was told that now and again, especially after dreams, a prophet rubs his spirit's drum with ashes, and sometimes also with butter, and asks God for peace and happiness. A prophet also builds a mud shrine, called *yiɛ̈* or, if it is shaped like a windscreen, *buor*, to his spirit, the largest monument of the first kind being the pyramid of *deng* in the Lou tribal territory (p. 306).

IV

776 I now come to the most difficult, and the most important, part of this survey. How do Nuer conceive of these spirits in relation to God? I do not attempt yet to make a full analysis of the notion of *kwoth*, but only to discuss a limited part of it, the nature of the spirits of the air; though what is said about them has some bearing on the nature of other spirits and of Spirit in general. The matter is, for us, complex and confusing, and the conclusion I reached about it, that the spirits of the air are conceived of as both separate beings and yet also as different manifestations of God, may at first sight seem to hold a contradiction.

We may say to begin with that there is no question of Nuer regarding these spirits as beings of the same importance as *kwoth a nhial*. Whatever else they may be thought to be they are not thought of as beings independent of and equal to him. There is only one God. This is evident from a number of facts.

776 177 In the first place, it is shown by the way Nuer regard the beliefs of neighbouring peoples. It creates no problem for them when they find other peoples approaching God under different titles and in different ways from their own. Some Nuer, in spite of the general isolation of the Nuer and their lack of interest in other peoples, are aware that in religious matters neighbouring peoples differ to a greater or lesser degree from themselves. Some of them know something of Dinka religious beliefs and ceremonies, and a few of them are also aware, though Islam has made no impression on them, that Arab traders have their own form of worship and, though the influence of the Christian missions has been negligible,[1] that the Christian missionaries and their converts have

797 [1] In 1940, some years after I had concluded my research, there were 464 Nuer (250 Catholics and 214 Protestants), easily the lowest figure for

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

*776 it and on the low fence enclosing it. Occasionally the spirit, again
*[792] as the spirits of the air may do, enters into (gweng) a man to abide with him. He then becomes a *guk col*, a prophet of *col*, and the spirit of lightning speaks through him to the people. Or he may be called a *gwan colwic*, the owner of a *colwic*. There is no clear distinction here between the spirit *col* and the *colwic* spirits, *col* being a collective representation of the *colwic* spirits in general.

*776 The *colwic* is a conception which appears to be, unlike many of their religious conceptions, not only native to the Nuer but at one time also peculiar to them;[1] and it is one of unusual interest. Its significance cannot be altogether perceived at this stage of our inquiry, but certain features of it may be remarked upon.

In that a *colwic* is a spirit which dwells in the sky and can fall and enter men it is like the air-spirits which also have their abode in the above and fall and enter men; but there is an important difference between the two conceptions. The spirits of the air derive, or proceed, directly from God but the *colwic* spirits were once human beings, created things. Consequently, whereas the spirits of the air are *gaat Kwoth*, sons of God, the *colwic* spirits are not, at any rate in the same sense. In the one case God descends to man, in the other he takes man up to him.

Apart from the fact that the spirits of the air and the *colwic* spirits both dwell on high there is in another respect something common to the two conceptions. In discussing prophets it was observed how Spirit in the form of spirits of the air can enter into men, the human being expelled, as it were, and the divine taking its place. There is in the idea a suggestion of the natural man being changed into the spiritual man. In the *colwic* conception we have again, though in a rather different form, this idea of the soul in exceptional circumstances being transmuted into Spirit. I emphasize this aspect of the belief because, as will be seen more clearly later, it is essential to an understanding of Nuer religious thought that the conceptions of 'soul' and 'spirit' should be distinguished

[1] Dr. Lienhardt tells me that the *colwic* of the Rek Dinka is a very different conception. It is an evil spirit of the bush. The Dinka probably borrowed both the idea and the word from the Nuer and they seem then to have quite changed its meaning in assimilating it to their own notions, especially to their *macardit* conception. The Twic Dinka conception is nearest to the Nuer one (Fr. A. Nebel in P. W. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 161). Twic country is coterminous with that of the Bul Nuer.

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

husband's people and the wife's people should the wife die in her first child-birth, and it is possible that he performs sacrifice in the course of the negotiations.[1] The word *kuaar* is also occasionally used instead of the more usual word *gwan*, possessor, in the titles of the *gwan muot* (or *ngul* or *ngul ghok*), possessor of the spear, who performs rites for success in war and hunting (p. 243); the *gwan biedh*, possessor of the fishing-spear, a kinsman of the leopard-skin priest who acts in homicide cases as his assistant in western Nuerland (p. 246); the *gwan nyanga* or *gwan thoi*, possessor of crocodile or of grass, who performs rites to protect people during fishing (p. 67); the *gwan biedh*, possessor of the fishing-spear, or *kuaar juaini*, priest of grass, who performs rites for the same purpose (p. 74); the *gwan pini*, possessor of water, who performs ritual against floods in western Nuerland; and the *gwan kecu*, possessor of durra-bird (p. 71). When asked about these specialists, Nuer say that when God created men he designated people to carry out certain functions, and their descendants have continued to perform them. I have, however, never heard *kuaar* used in speaking of the *tiet*, diviner or leech (p. 95). Nor is it ever used of persons possessed by spirits of the air or owners of nature sprites or fetishes, none of whom have traditional offices.

III

Gwan kwoth, possessor of a spirit, is an expression which may refer to what I have called a prophet or to someone who has a sprite or fetish or a totemic or totemistic familiar. All these persons may make sacrifice to their particular spirits on their own behalf or on behalf of others when they or others have been seized by the spirits or desire protection against dangers the spirits are associated with. I have already discussed them in earlier chapters, and here I speak further, though briefly, only of the prophets. A prophet, as we saw in Chapter II, is a person who is possessed by a spirit of the air or occasionally a *colwic* spirit, the possession giving him spiritual powers lacking in other persons, including the leopard-skin priests. The possessed is thus also the possessor.

[1] I have no detailed account of his functions. Mr. Jackson (op. cit., p. 151) gives a different account of them, and Dr. Howell's account (*A Manual of Nuer Law*, p. 54) differs from mine in one important particular. I imagine that the *kuaar yika* was not often called upon to act.

PRIESTS AND PROPHETS

793 792 Some of the chief characteristics of a prophet can be seen by comparing him to the priest. The priest is a traditional functionary of Nuer society; the prophet is a recent development. The priest has an appointed sacrificial role in certain situations of the social life, particularly in homicide and blood-feud; the prophet's functions are indeterminate. The priest's powers are transmitted by descent from the first priest—a social heritage; the prophet's powers are charismatic—an individual inspiration. The virtue of the priest resides in his office; that of the prophet in himself. The priest has no cult; the prophet has certain cultic features. But the most outstanding conceptual difference is that whereas in the priest man speaks to God, in the prophet God, in one or other of his hypostases, speaks to man. The priest stands on the earth and looks to the sky. Heavenly beings descend from the sky and fill the prophets. The prophet is the mouthpiece of a spirit, its interpreter; it is he who speaks but he speaks under its control. We can only understand Nuer faith in their prophets, and also their fear of them, when we know that when they speak as prophets it is Spirit which speaks by their lips, theopneustic speech. The prophet in making his declarations says, 'I am such-and-such', naming the spirit, and '*kwoth a lar*', 'Spirit says', just as the Old Testament prophets say, 'saith Yahweh', or the Prophet Muhammad says, 'saith Allah'. What the prophet says and what Spirit says are all mixed up together, the two being interspersed in such a manner that they cannot be separated. When we reflect on the dangerous quality in Spirit we do not have to wonder at the reverence Nuer show the vehicles of this manifestation of it in their midst. Another important difference is that while the priest has, when acting as priest, dealings only with Spirit in its most comprehensive sense of God the prophets deal with particular spirits, 'spirits of the air' or 'children of God'. God does not enter into men and inspire them. It will readily be seen that there is a fundamental difference, and one that will be still more apparent when a short account of prophets has been given, between the representative of man to the divine and the representative of the divine to man.

792 But though Nuer regard priests and prophets as very different sorts of persons they do not think of them as being opposed to one another. Government officials, who were very hostile to the prophets and described them, confusing prophets with diviners and leeches, most inappropriately as 'magicians', 'necromancers', and

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

'witchdoctors' and as 'reactionary upstarts' and 'anti-tribal', speak of them, indeed, as having undermined the traditional privileges of the priests. But this is not a Nuer way of looking at the matter. They do not think of their leopard-skin priests as being privileged persons. Also, I have never heard a Nuer contrast priest with prophet or suggest that there could be rivalry between them as such. Moreover, some of the best-known prophets were, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel of the Old Testament, both priests and prophets.

Owing to the action taken against them by the Government I had no opportunity to get to know any Nuer prophets well enough to reach an understanding of the *forma mentis* of a prophet.[1] According to Nuer tales about them their behaviour was most abnormal. The first prophet, or at any rate the first to achieve fame, was Ngundeng son of Bung, of the Lou tribe, a prophet of the spirit *deng*, who died in 1906. He acquired his powers by prolonged fasts. It is said that he lived for weeks by himself in the bush, eating animal and human excrement, that he used to sit on a cattle-peg in his kraal and let it penetrate his anus, that he used to wander about the bush for days mumbling to himself or sit in his cattle byre doing the same, and that when in such a mood he would refuse all food except ashes, which he had cooked for him. Mr. Coriat says that he was in the habit of falling into trances on the top of the roof of his cattle byre.[2] After he had established himself as a prophet he seems to have given up his solitary wanderings, though he still used to shut himself up in his hut from time to time to undergo long fasts. Nuer say that when the spirit *deng* seized him he could climb into the air without support and could also run up and down from the ground to the top of his byre. His son Gwek, described by Mr. Coriat as of squat body, misshapen arms and legs, and a short toad-like head, also had a reputation for daemonic exhibitions. Mr. Coriat records that he would spend, and spent during Mr. Coriat's visit to his home, all day shouting from the top of what has been described as a pyramid, a remarkable feat both of agility, for the pyramid was most difficult of ascent, and of endurance.[3] Perhaps we would be right in seeing in the habit of mounting to tops of byre and pyramid a symbolic

[1] When I began my studies Gwek, the leading prophet, had already been shot; Dwal, the next most prominent, was in prison; so also was the well-known prophet Car (I declined the administration's offer that I might visit them in prison); and the influential prophet Bhom was banished in the course of them.

[2] Op. cit., p. 224.

[3] Ibid., pp. 226–9.

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

792 expression of the prophet's relation to Spirit, the spirit in him lifting him up, as it were, to its own realm.

792 778 The construction of this so-called pyramid (*bie*), a conspicuous landmark in Lou tribal territory, was begun by Ngundeng and completed by Gwek. It was a huge mound of earth and debris some fifty to sixty feet high with a base diameter of about a hundred feet. It was surmounted by elephant tusks and a spear decorated with an ostrich egg and feathers and encircled at the base with dozens of elephant tusks, numbers of which were also buried in the mound.[1] The purpose of the mound seems to have been to honour *deng* and increase the prestige of his prophet, though it may have expressed also the feeling of the above quality of Spirit. It became a cult centre, people from the whole of eastern Nuerland, and even from the west of the Nile, bringing cattle there for sacrifice; and Ngundeng and Gwek kept in a kraal near by a herd of cattle with black and white markings (*rial*) dedicated to *bungdit*, the mother of *deng*, with whom these markings are [177] associated. All this is more in accordance with Dinka than Nuer thought and custom, and there is some reason to suppose that the idea of the mound was, like the *deng* conception itself, borrowed from the Dinka. There is said to be a similar, though smaller, mound at Thoc, in eastern Gaajak country, built by a prophet called Deng, son of Dul. Ngundeng's mound was blown up with high explosive by the British administration during a punitive expedition in 1928 against his son's followers. However, much of it still remains, and Dr. Lienhardt tells me that it is said at the present time that sometimes at night a strange light is seen shining from it; and when a recent eclipse of the sun occurred people said that Ngundeng was returning. Another prophet, Deng Leaka, a

792 785 prophet of the spirit diu, a Dinka of the Gaawar tribe, also acquired his spirit by fasting and solitude. He left his home and wandered in the bush where for many days he sat under a tree without eating. When found he was engaged in collecting hundreds of shells of the giant land snail and arranging them in rows. This abnormal side to the prophets is to be seen in their unkempt hair and their beards, both of which are objectionable to ordinary

[1] Captain H. H. Wilson in *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, edited by Count Gleichen, 1905, vol. I, p. 140; information from Major C. H. Stigand, *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1918, p. 210; H. C. Jackson, op. cit., p. 158; P. Coriat, op. cit., p. 224.

16: Evans-Pritchard E-S (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

PLATE XV

•792

Prophet

[facing p. 306]

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

792 Nuer. The photograph of a prophet in Plate XV was taken by
785 Major-General Sir Charles Gwynn early in the present century. We see from it how different is the appearance as well as the representation of a prophet from that of a priest!

792 The ascetic and abnormal element in the prophetic personality would seem to have been mixed up with personal ambition, a striving after renown, power, and riches, a combination which made the prophets outstanding figures in Nuerland. Reports by administrative officials constantly denounced them for their greed and ambition and for being 'plausible and unscrupulous' and 'charlatans'. Though these reports do not show great sensitivity in distinguishing between the ideas of holiness and morality, there is an element of truth in what they say. We have noted that it was not just by chance that a man acquired an air-spirit. There is nothing an ordinary Nuer desires less than to be in contact with Spirit. He seeks by sacrifice to rid himself of it or to keep it at a distance, for it is dangerous to him. But a prophet sought inspiration, entry of Spirit into himself and its filling him; and in seeking it he could not but have been aware of the influence it would bring him. Gwek seems to have been what we should call avaricious, though I never heard Nuer say so, and the only prophet of distinction I met, Buom of Dok country, whose spirit was *teny*, was, I would say, a man of cunning whom Nuer themselves regarded as selfish and greedy to acquire large herds. The hostility I sensed among his neighbours may have been due in his case to the support given him by the Government, which had appointed him a 'chief', but I think it is true to say in general that though Nuer feared their leading prophets, their fear, shown in the great outward deference, and in the case of women one might say veneration, they paid them, was tinged with resentment and hostility. They were glad to have people with such powers among them, but it always goes against the grain with Nuer to have to put themselves in an inferior position towards anyone; and in the main we may agree with Capt. V. H. Fergusson when he wrote: 'None of my Nuer [the western Nuer] will tolerate injustice in his everyday life even from a witchdoctor [prophet].'[1] Their attitude to their prophets displayed the same ambivalence that they showed towards the spirits of the air themselves and indeed to Spirit in any form. They wanted it and at the same time did not want it.

[1] *Sudan Notes and Records* 1923, p. 107.

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

792 A very complex representation would seem to be involved here, in which ideas about persons and ideas about Spirit are mixed together with regard to a man who in one way of thinking about him is man and in another way of thinking about him is Spirit and who is also conceived of as both man and Spirit.

792 787 As explained in Chapter II, the chief function of such prophets as gained any considerable following and became political figures was their hermeneutic role in warfare. They spoke the directions of the spirits of the air for raids on the Dinka[1] and for resistance to the slavers and the administration and made sacrifices to them. Their other functions were subsidiary and were exercised by lesser [155] prophets also: healing, particularly curing barrenness of women, staying of epidemics lethal to men or cattle, and exorcism of troublesome spirits. They were also credited with power to foretell events and with a more than usual insight (*gwic*). A prophet heals people by rubbing his spittle on them or by sprinkling them with water, milk, or butter, and his inspiration gives him foreknowledge, but he, like anyone else, relies on sacrifice in times of trouble; and he may be asked to sacrifice for any purpose except on those occasions reserved to the priesthood. People ask him to sacrifice on their behalf, not because they cannot make sacrifice themselves, but because sacrifice by him is felt to have special efficacy in that he has a special and intimate association with Spirit. Nevertheless, though prophets, like priests, may sacrifice on behalf of other people, the distinctive character of the prophet is not, as it is of the priest, his sacrificial role, but his revelational role deriving from spiritual inspiration. Hence, so I have been told, women, as well as men, may become minor prophets, though I believe only an old, and possibly barren, woman, of whom Nuer say '*coa wut*', 'she has become a man', would do so. A female prophet would not sacrifice.

792 668 I mentioned briefly, because I have treated the matter elsewhere, the political significance of the Nuer priests, their office being a politico-religious institution of the traditional social order. The prophets can also be regarded from the same point of view, as a politico-religious institution which has recently emerged in answer to changes in the social order. It may be hard to believe that people with prophetic powers have not always existed among the Nuer, but there is no evidence that they have; and all Nuer with whom

[1] They acquired substantial herds from their share of the booty.

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

I have discussed the question stated that in old days, before *deng*, the first of the air-spirits to fall to earth, entered into men towards the end of last century there were no prophets at all, only the *kuer*, the priests. I have suggested in an earlier book that their appearance might be explained by historical events—the expansion of the Nuer and, more particularly, the threat to their independence by northern Arab slavers, the Mahdists, and Anglo-Egyptian rule, which required, if it were to be met, greater political unity and the development of political authority. This view accords also with what has been said in general about the relation of Nuer religious conceptions to their social structure. It is possible that some of the prophets might have established political authority and leadership overriding local loyalties and sectional interests had they been allowed to, for prophetic powers tend to become hereditary, passing to whichever son is susceptible. Thus the mantle of Ngundeng fell upon his son Gwek, who was more a political, and less a religious, figure than his father had been; and the mantle of Deng Leaka fell upon his son Dwal. The Government effectively stopped development in this direction. Direct British administration was instituted, and no more influential prophets emerged. On the other hand, far from the idea of spirits—air-spirits, totemic and totemistic spirits, nature sprites, and fetish spirits—dwelling among men having been eclipsed it has spread more widely and in ever-increasing variety. This was already beginning to happen when I was in Nuerland (in the years 1930, 1931, 1935, and 1936), but the Nuer of the areas in which I carried out most of my research, the Lou and eastern Jikany tribes, had heard of only a few of the many spirits already familiar to those to the west of the Nile. So strongly have they now invaded these territories that, Dr. Lienhardt tells me, they have established themselves among the Anuak, who live yet farther to the east and had no knowledge of them as late as 1940. If my interpretation of the emergence and proliferation of new religious conceptions in terms of structure and structural developments is correct it would follow that we have here a counterpart in religious thought to an increasing fragmentation and individualization amounting by this time to a breakdown of the traditional social order.

Historical circumstances have brought the Nuer into closer communication at all points with foreign ideas; and the breakdown of their traditional way of life and the taking over of some

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

792 776 182 [177] of these ideas are part of the same process of change. As we have noted, they say of their air-spirits which inspire their prophets, and also in general of spirits which have fallen from above to earth, that they took them over from foreign peoples, mostly from the Dinka; and it is also possible that, as Mr. H. C. Jackson suggests,[1] there is a relation between the appearance of prophets among the Nuer and the spread of Dervish influence, for it was about the time of the Mahdist upheaval that their first prophets arose, and I was expressly told by one Nuer that the first spirit they heard of entering men was *madi* (?al-Mahdi) in the lands of the north and that afterwards they heard of *deng* and then of other spirits.

792 182 Although the emergence of prophets can be interpreted in terms of historical events and structural changes just as the priesthood can be interpreted in terms of the functioning of the traditional tribal system, the prophet's significance for an understanding of Nuer religious thought calls for comment not required in the case of the priest. The rise of prophets and the increase of every other kind of 'owners' of spirits may indeed be a response, first to a challenge and then to disintegration, but it is a response made within a set of religious conceptions and has, therefore, a significance for the study of those conceptions without regard to whatever it may have been which occasioned the response. That the response should have taken a religious form does not surprise us, for that has been a common enough reaction to European rule in Africa and elsewhere, and the Nuer are, in any case, conspicuously religious. What claims our attention is rather the kind of religious form it took, a form which is at the same time both a development of potentialities in their traditional religion and a change in its character. We have seen in an earlier chapter how the Nuer notion of Spirit lends itself to refraction without limits. If this had not been so all the new spiritual conceptions which have arisen in the course of the last two generations could not have come into existence without entirely changing the character of Nuer religious thought. As it is, they have partly changed it.

[1] Op. cit., p. 91.